

rhodesian history

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Review Articles.



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Edited by R. S. Roberts

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AFRICAN LABOUR IN THE CHARTERED COMPANY PERIOD*

J. M. MACKENZIE

University of Lancaster

A CONSTANT REFRAIN runs through all early published work on Rhodesia, through official documents of the Southern Rhodesian administration or of the Colonial Office in London, through any private or semi-official correspondence of the chartered period: the labour problem. Again and again it was said that the development of Southern Rhodesia was being retarded by the reluctance of the African population to go to work. In consequence many extraordinary schemes were got up to try to provide labour. Firstly there were attempts to increase the African population of Southern Rhodesia. The Fingoes were invited by Rhodes himself to immigrate from the Cape.¹ Tribes from Portuguese East Africa, from the Northern Transvaal and from Bechuanaland were encouraged, sometimes in some secrecy, to cross the border into Rhodesia.² The Chamber of Mines requested a policy of encouraging the many thousands of labourers who migrated from Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland to bring their families with them and settle permanently in Southern Rhodesia, although they did not specify whether this permanent settlement would be in reserves or in urban locations.³ In 1917 when a serious rebellion broke out in the Barue district of Portuguese East Africa, thousands of refugees crossed into the Inyanga District.⁴ These people were invited to settle permanently and were indeed immediately integrated into the labour force by the provision of grain to the wives and children on condition that the able bodied men went out to work. Once, however, the taxation and rent demands of the Company began to make themselves felt, many of these people returned to their lands in Moçambique, and this

* I am indebted to the Leverhulme Foundation for a research grant which enabled me to spend from July to September 1970 in Rhodesia. This article is based on a lecture delivered to the Central Africa Historical Association Conference held in August 1970.

¹ [Public Record Office] C.O. 417/393, Milner to Lyttelton, 11.x.1904, encl. Clarke to Milner, 11.ix.1904 quotes Rhodes as telling the Fingoes, 'We do not love one another so much as to give land without any return . . . [and] having come to your reserves and your titles I ask you to give at least three months work a year.'

² For a fuller discussion of these and later movements, see J. M. Mackenzie, 'African Labour in South Central Africa, 1890-1914', Univ. of British Columbia, unpub. Ph.D. thesis, 1969. The Colonial Office was sceptical of the Company's ability or desire to provide these people with sufficient land, for their labour was clearly the primary motive, and it was therefore directed that all immigrants be made aware of the land and labour situation, C.O. 417/283, Chamberlain to Milner, 26.ix.1900.

³ Historical Manuscripts Collection, CH6 1/1 [Chamber of Mines, Salisbury, Minute Books, Executive Committee and Annual General Meetings, 16.xi.1898 - 8.xii.1906], Executive Committee, 7.xi.1900.

⁴ N 9/1/20-21, [Chief Native Commissioner, Reports, Annual], 1917-18, N.C. Inyanga to C.N.C.

attempt to increase the population on a 'beggar my neighbour' basis was as unsuccessful as the others had been.

But the efforts to augment the labour force went much further than this. There were a series of extraordinary attempts at the turn of the century to introduce Somalis, Abyssinians, South Arabians and Yemenis into Southern Rhodesia. There were schemes mooted to introduce Algerian, Italian, Zanzibari and East African labour, and even Queensland Kanakas. Some Somalis and some South Arabians actually arrived in 1900 and 1901; one group rioted in Beira on hearing rumours that they were to be sold into slavery. All of them, confronted with underground mining work, panicked and proved disastrous as labourers. The recruiting schemes were hurriedly brought to a halt, and these men quietly slip from view.⁵ There were also agitations for and against the introduction of Indians⁶ and Chinese.⁷

All this raises a whole series of important questions. Why was there a labour problem in Southern Rhodesia, regarded as so acute that the Company should be willing to go to this trouble and expense? There are after all times when a labour surplus is reported, when there are stories of men wandering from district to district searching for work in vain before returning to their homes half-starved and emaciated. Was the Southern Rhodesian African population really insufficient to provide for the needs of the mining and farming industries? Secondly, what was the nature of the Africans' response to the cash economy? This is of course the crux of the problem. We have in this period a confrontation between the subsistence economy and the newly arrived cash economy, with paid labour as one of the principal links between the two. Did the African in this situation set out to maximise his real income, to use the cash economy as a means to greater productivity in the subsistence economy, or did he simply, as most contemporary sources imply, respond unwillingly to the external stimuli imposed upon him by the administration — the need to find his tax, the need to find his rent if he lived either on private or later on Company land, the need to acquire his lobola demanded in the Native Marriage Ordinance of 1901 for the legal registration of marriages.⁸ All this is bound up with the notion of the backward sloping labour supply function, the phenomenon by which if a man's wage is increased, his ceiling of

⁵ Many of these extraordinary schemes were put up by the Chambers of Mines. See CH6 1/1; Hist. Mss. Collect., RH2 1/1, Rhodesia Chamber of Mines, Bulawayo, Minute Books, Annual, Quarterly, Monthly . . . 27.ix.1900 – 19.ii.1940. The details can be found in A 11/2/8/2-8, Administrator's Office, Private Secretary's Papers, Correspondence, Labour: Abyssinian, Arab, Chinese, Indian.

⁶ The idea of Indian labour was scotched by Curzon in a celebrated dispatch which, much to the Company's chagrin, refused to make any distinction between German East Africa and Southern Rhodesia, C.O. 417/372, Curzon to Lord Hamilton, dispatch 20, 1902, encl. in Milner to Chamberlain 18.v.1903.

⁷ The prospect of Chinese labour produced enormous public opposition in Southern Rhodesia, and the Company soon realised that the important thing was to help the Transvaal obtain Chinese labour in order to relieve the demand on its own labour supply, A 1/5/5, Administrator's Office, In Letters, London Board, 18.vii.-18.xii.1903, Fox to Milton, 14.xi.1903.

⁸ C.O. 417/320, Milton to Clarke, 18.iii.1901, encl. in Perry to Chamberlain, 8.v.1901, explicitly mentions the stimulant to labour of the lobola ordinance.

want which is fixed and low will be reached more easily, and he will consequently work less. The labour supply will hence decline. This was a theory much beloved of the classical economists of the early nineteenth century. It was equally beloved of Southern Rhodesian employers in the Chartered period, who used it as an excuse to keep wages down to an irreducible minimum. Were they right? Did this expedient work to keep men working for a longer period?

The third question that must be asked is what was the relationship between the labour performance of various peoples and the type of land which they inhabited. From 1894, at the insistence of the Colonial Office, a policy of assigning reserves was introduced into Southern Rhodesia. From that year onwards, three different sorts of land can be distinguished. Firstly there were the reserves, introduced with the Gwaai and Shangani reserves in Matabeleland, and later augmented throughout the country by the haphazard policy of the Native Commissioners simply setting aside in their own districts land that they considered suitable and sufficient. Then there was the alienated land, alienated to mines and farms, sometimes occupied, sometimes in the hands of absentee landowners or companies. Lastly there was the unalienated land, which the Company regarded as its own until disburdened of the idea in the Privy Council decision of 1918. Related to this problem of the land-labour connection is the relationship between the nature of the indigenous economy and the labour performance of a given people. The type of land, the mode of agriculture, the extent of stock-holding, the quality of the harvests from year to year all had an effect on the labour performance.

There is a basic question underlying all of these. Why was a purely migrant labour system established, a system in which the Africans spent part of their time in the cash economy and most of their time in the indigenous economy? Why was a permanent labour system, in which Africans could migrate with their families into permanent urban and mine townships with all its attendant advantages of a stable labour force and greater efficiency of labour, never countenanced?

It must not be supposed that the experience of paid labour arrived north of the Limpopo with the advent of the Pioneer Column. As early as 1876 one Alexander Bailie travelled up to Bulawayo on a labour recruiting expedition for the Kimberley diamond fields. Lobengula was disposed to be obliging and sent out a strong patrol to secure some labourers. Only 24 men were brought in, whereupon Lobengula provided Bailie with 50 of his own attendants. Since Bailie had hoped for 1 000 men, this significantly fell very far short of expectations.⁹ Nevertheless by 1844 there were no less than 120 Ndebele at work in Kimberley.¹⁰ There were opportunities nearer home too, at the London and Limpopo Mining Company at Tati, although its

⁹ Hist. Mss. Collect., BA10 2/1, A. C. Bailie Papers, Journals, Expedition to Lobengula, 31.v.1876 - 10.viii.1898; L. H. Gann, *A History of Southern Rhodesia*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1965, p.60.

¹⁰ S. van der Horst, *Native Labour in South Africa*, London, O.U.P., 1942, p.84.

labour force was always small, and the company never succeeded in establishing its relationship with the Ndebele on a sure footing.¹¹ In these ways, men were sent out to 'earn a gun' for the tribe for at least fifteen years before the Pioneer Column arrived.

With the arrival of the Europeans, however, labour became a much more immediate experience. Large numbers of Africans were employed by the Pioneer Column on road making as it proceeded slowly northwards.¹² And once the pioneers scattered to take up their farms and their gold claims they simply super-imposed their settlement on the pre-existing pattern of African villages in Mashonaland and exacted labour as required.¹³ As the South African Native Affairs Commission of 1905 put it, as the land was alienated, the Africans on it were 'left to make the best terms they could with the owners, and are generally allowed to remain upon condition of paying rent, furnishing labour or both'.¹⁴ Although there were attempts to regulate this by the High Commissioner's Proclamation No. 14 of 1896 and by the Private Locations Ordinance of 1908, many extra-legal arrangements remained in force. These arrangements clearly had obvious benefits for the labour-hungry settlers, and in effect created tiny reservoirs of labour attached to each European enterprise. There seems to have been no shortage in these early years.¹⁵ This was of course the period of the first flush of optimism and when requirements were low.

During this early Chartered period, the Colonial Office positively went out of its way to avoid responsibility. When a petition from the settlers was forwarded to the Colonial Office by Labouchere, Knutsford, the Secretary of State, declared that he could not involve himself in the Company's ordinances.¹⁶ Moreover, the Colonial Office had refused to appoint a Resident in the chartered territory. Although A. R. Colquhoun declared that Europeans would not be allowed to take land inhabited by the Africans,¹⁷ this was impossible in practice. The first real administrator, Jameson, acted — to put it in the words of a Colonial Office official in 1897 — like a 'beneficent despot',¹⁸ and not always very beneficent. It is hardly surprising then

¹¹ See *Copies and Extracts of Further Correspondence relating to Affairs in Mashonaland* [C. 7196]. H.C. 1893-4, lxi, 591.

¹² For a good description of this, see Hist. Mss. Collect. PE1 3/2, E. G. Pennefather Papers, Letters sent to Mrs. A. Pennefather, his mother, 28.iv.1890 – 16.viii.1891.

¹³ Hist. Mss. Collect., MA9 1/1, F.O. Mallett Papers, Out Letters, 2.xi.1891 – 25.x.1897, Mallett to father, 3.vii.1892: 'We have great trouble in getting native labour up here, the only way we can do it is to go and catch them at dawn and compel them to work.' For their labour, Mallett paid one blanket and a shirt a month — a common form of payment at the time.

¹⁴ *South African Native Affairs Commission 1903-5* [Cd.2399]. H.C. 1905, lv, 69.

¹⁵ See for example E. F. Knight, *Rhodesia of Today*, London, Longmans Green, 1895, p.4. Knight, no doubt reflecting some Pioneers' views, felt that more labour would be forthcoming if Africans were allowed to remain in scattered locations amongst the European population.

¹⁶ C. Palley, *The Constitutional History and Law of Southern Rhodesia*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1966, p.105.

¹⁷ R. H. Palmer, *Aspects of Rhodesian Land Policy*, Salisbury, Central Africa Historical Association, 1968, Local Series No. 22, p.8.

¹⁸ C.O. 417/231, Minute 17.vi.1897.

that the early labour policy should have been entirely haphazard. The Company made its own ordinances and supplemented them with extra-legal administrative activity.

Labour very quickly played a role in the relationship between the Ndebele and the Shona and between these two and the Europeans. The Shona are said to have regarded labour for the Europeans in and around Fort Victoria as in some sense a protection from Ndebele raids. At least the Europeans liked to look on it in this light.¹⁹ There is evidence too that Jameson and others hoped that the Ndebele could be persuaded to work and the regiments broken up in the consequent migration.²⁰ The situation of the Shona was to be used of course as the principal excuse for the Matabele War, and the idea that the Ndebele could be attracted to work was but a forlorn hope. With the end of the War the Mashonaland pattern was simply repeated in Matabeleland. Jameson had explicitly stated the requirement to go out to work as part of the settlement after the war,²¹ and soon the owners of farms and claims taken up under the Victoria Agreement were in effect levying labour from those villages that found themselves on their land or nearby. Nor did Bulawayo have problems; within a few weeks of the end of the war, a gang of 800 Ndebele entered the town to work on the brickfields and elsewhere.²² There is incidentally some evidence that the Zansi class of the Ndebele sent the Holi out to work for them and earn their tax once it was introduced,²³ rather reminiscent of Lobengula's methods in obliging Alexander Bailie. Hence some Europeans regarded labour as a means of equalising Ndebele society.²⁴

The Colonial Office now intervened. Since before the war the Company had wished to levy a tax on Africans, partly for revenue, partly to stimulate Africans into the cash economy, which automatically meant (and this was explicitly stated in the Company's case) labour for Europeans.²⁵ At this point it is necessary to indulge in a little retrospect, for it is essential to understand the Colonial Office's attitudes. The Colonial Office attitude towards colonial labour in the nineteenth century had been conditioned

¹⁹ S. Glass, *The Matabele War*, London, Longmans, 1968, p.45.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.36. See also Hist. Mss. Collect., JA1 1/1, L.S. Jameson Papers, Correspondence and Other Papers, General, 18.vi.1739 – 23.xii.1913, ff. 109-11, Jameson to Sauer, 4.x.1893: '[The War] will be a quicker way of making the country go ahead than my peaceful policy of gradual absorption of the Matabele amongst our black labourers. I still think the latter would have been better and could have been carried out.'

²¹ There is considerable evidence of this informal arrangement: Knight, p.10; F. C. Selous, *Sunshine and Storm in Rhodesia*, London, Ward, 1896, p.x; F. Hone, *Southern Rhodesia*, London, Bell, 1909, p.41.

²² Knight, p.17. He pointed out that Africans in Southern Rhodesia could earn in this period more than domestic servants in Britain, which was often perfectly true, although there was less security in Rhodesian employment. Moreover, the relative earnings of Africans and Europeans were closer at this time than they were to be at any subsequent period.

²³ H. C. Thomson, *Rhodesia and its Government*, London, Smith Elder, 1898, p.196: 'Jameson had assured Gambo that the Holi would still have to be the servants of the Matabele, but the Matabele were forced to work alongside the Holi.' See also Hone, p.41.

²⁴ Thomson, p.186.

²⁵ C.O. 417/110, B.S.A. Co. to C.O., 17.v.1893.

primarily by the abolition of slavery. To Colonial Office officials like Sir Henry Taylor, whose career spans almost 50 years,²⁶ and to a colonial theorist like the third Earl Grey, the sloth into which the emancipated slaves sank, at least in those West Indian islands where there was plenty of land, was a terrible lesson for the Victorian conception of the virtues of labour. The notion of tropical indolence was accepted wholeheartedly, and the lesson of the West Indies seemed to be that workers in the tropics required firstly a modicum of land hunger and secondly a cash stimulant, namely taxation, as 'motives to exertion'.²⁷

When the third Earl Grey became Colonial Secretary in 1846, he was able to put his ideas into practice. In Ceylon, in the Gold Coast, in Mauritius, and finally in Natal in 1849, taxes were introduced on Grey's orders. But for Grey, and for his permanent Under Secretary, Herman Merivale, the other part of the equation, the modicum of land hunger, would not be achieved by the establishment of reserves.²⁸ Indigenous peoples could best be induced to work by being placed on locations scattered amongst the European population, by whose proximity they would learn habits of settled industry and civilised manners. In Natal this policy was vigorously opposed by Sir Theophilus Shepstone who argued that native peoples could only be effectively administered through the medium of reserves.

Shepstone won, and by the late nineteenth century his view had become colonial orthodoxy, and had indeed come to be regarded as the more liberal of the two policies. Reserves were seen as the best protection for African rights; without them, they would become hostages to capitalism, virtually *ascripti gloebi*.²⁹ As soon as taxation was introduced in 1894, at first illegally by the Company,³⁰ the Colonial Office insisted on the creation of reserves 'for the protection of the native interest'. In doing so the Colonial Office gave the biggest fillip to the growth of the migrant labour system with all its inefficiency, and all its attendant hardships for the migrants.

But there are other important factors in the establishment of the migrant labour system. In 1892 the Company had introduced its rules and regulations for the native location in Salisbury. It is clear from these that the location was designed to be a place of highly transitory residence, a place that any unemployed African would have to leave almost at once.³¹ Moreover, he

²⁶ H. J. Taylor, *Autobiography*, 2 vols., London, Longmans, 1885.

²⁷ The phrase is Earl Grey's. For his policies and some of his dispatches, see his *The Colonial Policy of Lord John Russell's Administration*, 2 vols., London, Bentley, 1853; C. B. Adderley, *Review of 'The Colonial Policy of Lord John Russell's Administration' by Earl Grey*, 1853; and of *Subsequent Colonial History*, London, Stamford, 1869.

²⁸ See H. Merivale, *Lectures on Colonization and Colonies*, 2 vols., London, Longmans, 1841-2.

²⁹ J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study*, London, Nisbet, 1902, p.295.

³⁰ Edward Fairfield admitted that the Company had been collecting taxation wholly illegally, but recommended that it would be better not to quarrel with the Company over the issue, C.O. 417/136, Minute, 29.vi.1894.

³¹ It is significant that these rules and regulations together with the Registration of Natives Regulations of 1895 were not transmitted to the Colonial Office until 1897, C.O. 417/232.

was given very little grace on arrival in the town to find a job.³² The regulations were praised by Graham Bower, the Imperial Secretary at the Cape, as a salutary measure designed against loafing.³³ Already in the positioning of the location and in the imposition of curfews on Africans, the desire for social and economic segregation is clear. And that desire was incompatible with a permanent labour system. This tradition was continued with the Native Urban Locations Ordinance (which included the mines) of 1906 and the Salisbury Native Rules and Regulations of 1907. These caused considerable concern within the Colonial Office where they were regarded by officials as 'elaborate and vexatious' and as being designed 'to make life on the location as burdensome as possible'.³⁴

There are other more specifically economic reasons why a migrant labour system grew up. An economy in this incipient state required a large, but highly flexible and highly mobile labour force. In almost every sector of the European economy the demand for labour was for large numbers for short periods. This is obviously true of the construction of telegraphs, railways and towns. It is no less true of the mining industry, less obviously, where in view of the all too frequent tailing off of the Rhodesian reefs, mines closed down as rapidly as they opened. It was true of farming also where large numbers of labourers were required for building, fencing, ditching and so on. And once farming operations were well under way the need was still for large numbers for short periods, in the harvesting of wheat for example or the securing of the tobacco crop in later years. It was of course unfortunate that farmers required these large numbers at precisely the times the indigenous economy required them too.

There is yet another consideration in the development of the migrant labour system, and that is the predilections of the Africans themselves. The migrant labour system was a harsh one, but Africans preferred it to a system where they would be entirely at the mercy of the vagaries of the European economy. No traditional leader wished to see his people melting away to the towns or mining locations on a permanent basis. Their attachment to their lands was of course considerable and their position in the social and economic life of their own people had to be preserved against old age and infirmity. Moreover, labourers acquainted with the nature of mining compounds and town locations were reluctant to introduce their wives and children into this environment. This much is very well attested. It is possible that these considerations decline in importance as time goes on, particularly as Africans are moved around from one type of land to another. And of course the fact remains that the inducements to permanent labour, good

³² At Umtali the police were later described as over-zealous. They had begun to arrest Africans before they had time to reach the Native Commissioner's office to obtain a pass. This had an adverse effect upon the labour supply in the town, N 9/1/7, Report N.C. Umtali, 31.iii.1901.

³³ LO 5/2/18, London Office, In Letters, Cape Town (Kimberley), 23.iii. - 4.v.1892, Bower to Secretary B.S.A. Co., 7.iv.1892.

³⁴ C.O. 417/438, minute of Grindle on Selborne to Elgin, 25.xi.1907.

housing, urban plots, sufficient wages, were not there. It was all too convenient for the European economy to treat the indigenous one as a vast system of outdoor relief for the women, the children and the old.

One last and final boost to the migrant labour system was given by the introduction of enormous numbers of labourers from Northern Rhodesia, Nyasaland, and Portuguese East Africa. The administrations of these territories regarded their African populations as a natural asset which could not be allowed to waste away. Migrant labour was a lucrative business in terms of deferred pay, fees paid by recruiters and recruiting organisations, taxation and wages brought back, so repatriation was always an important part of these migration schemes, for the migrants could not be permitted to be lost to the mother country permanently. Foreign labourers eventually constituted as much as 75 per cent of the total Southern Rhodesian labour force.³⁵ It cannot be doubted that the Rhodesian administration came to look on Africans in Southern Rhodesia in precisely the same light as the migrants from the north. Labour was a commodity to be extracted and then returned at will. Moreover these migrants constituted a serious source of competition for indigenous Africans seeking work. The 'foreigners' were prepared to contract for longer periods having come so far; indeed if they had come through the Labour Bureau there were minimum periods of from six to twelve months. By the time Africans within Southern Rhodesia were prepared to leave their own lands after the harvest, they invariably found many of the available jobs taken by these competitors from the north.

The stimulant of the ten shilling hut tax was not apparently sufficient, particularly as this tax led to a very rapid reduction in the number of huts inhabited by Africans — a natural response perhaps, but one that could have serious consequences from the point of view of health. In the early years, the administration's Native Commissioners indulged quite openly in forced labour. The evidence for this is conclusive, and comes largely from their own reports and replies to Chief Native Commissioner circulars.³⁶ The forced labour issue has been seen as one of the causes of the 1896-97 revolts. Certainly, Sir Richard Martin in his celebrated report on the rebellions considered this to be the case;³⁷ and so did Selous.³⁸ The years following on the rebellions saw the hammering out of the definitions of 'forced labour', 'persuasion', and 'advice'.

The situation in the closing years of the century is instructive. The labour supply fluctuated violently. In 1898 there was a serious dearth of labour. In 1899 on the other hand the Native Department insisted on the hut tax being paid in July and refused to give a period of grace as had been the practice

³⁵ *British South Africa Company. Directors' Report for the Year ending 31st March, 1903*, London, 1904, p.15.

³⁶ See for example N 1/2/2, Chief Native Commissioner, In Letters, Replies to Circular, Native Labour, 30.xi. — 8.xii.1895.

³⁷ *Report by Sir R. E. R. Martin, K.C.M.G., on the Native Administration of the British South Africa Company* [C.8547]. H.C. 1897, lxii, 561.

³⁸ *Sunshine and Storm*, preface.

hitherto. The result was a glut of labour: a large proportion of the intending labourers had to be sent home and within a very short time there was a renewed labour famine. It was in an attempt to rectify this situation through a whole series of indabas held in 1899 that the two Chief Native Commissioners, Taylor and Taberer, aroused the suspicions of the Colonial Office on the forced labour issue again.³⁹

These indabas were held with a considerable show of European power: local Europeans, Native Commissioners, police, were present. In Mashonaland, the Bishop of Mashonaland and a detachment of 50 British South Africa Police took part. In Matabeleland the recruiting agents of the new labour bureau were introduced to the assembled headmen. In their addresses to these indabas the Chief Native Commissioners insisted that it was the duty of the people to go out to work, that other peoples like the Fingoes would come in and take their land, that Mr. Rhodes would be very angry with them, that it was a white man's country and that Africans had to work like white men, that the local reserve would be taken from them if they did not work, and that although there would be no force used it would be the induna's duty to turn out labour. At each indaba stress was laid on the idea of batches of men going out to work for three months at a time. In one district Taylor asked how they would like it if he were to send the police and messengers round the kraals to turn people out to work.

The assembled headmen were far from inarticulate at these meetings and their remarks were faithfully recorded. On two occasions, at Insiza and Bubi, headmen expressed bewilderment that they were told in one breath there would be no forced labour, and in the next that they would have to turn out labour. There were complaints also of poor wages, of injuries and deaths at the mines, that there were not enough men left to work the land, of the fact that bureau recruits earned less than those recruited independently, that 'Cape boys' received much higher wages, and that they were sent back when there was no work for them.

The reports of these indabas caused a great deal of fluttering in the dovetails of the Colonial Office. To Chamberlain himself they smacked of forced labour.⁴⁰ The Colonial Office brushed aside the attempts of the Company and of Taylor to defend these indabas, and insisted that the Native Commissioners should play no part in the recruitment of African

³⁹ C.O. 417/276, annexures to minutes of meeting of Board of B.S.A. Co., 18.x.1899.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Minute, 20.xii.1899. Chamberlain was ambivalent on the forced labour issue. In 1897, in an attempt to defend the Company he had written that forced labour was necessary to the spread of civilization in Africa, C.O. 417/232, Chamberlain to Frederick Graham, n.d. Milner always espoused this view, and it must of course be remembered that a form of forced labour for public works continued in force in British African territories until the Second World War, G. St. J. Orde-Browne, *The African Labourer*, London, O.U.P., 1933.

labour, except to give advice as to when and where labour was required.⁴¹ Of course, 'advice' could be interpreted in many different ways, but by and large the Native Commissioners adhered to this injunction under the intermittently watchful eyes of the Resident Commissioners, although from time to time a hue and cry on the forced labour issue was raised by the missionary Arthur Shearley Cripps right up to the end of the Chartered period.⁴²

So, in the absence of compulsion, the Company had to turn to the simple expedient of increasing the cash demands on the African. This was done through the Native Marriage Ordinance of 1901,⁴³ the transformation of the ten shilling hut tax into a one pound poll tax in 1903 after the Colonial Office had refused to countenance a two pound tax,⁴⁴ by the Private Locations Ordinance of 1908 which provided for the establishment of private locations on alienated land under rent or labour agreements, by the exactions of grazing fees, by the imposition of rent on the unalienated, supposedly Company land, and by the introduction of compulsory cattle dipping at considerable cost to the African in the provision of cattle dips on the reserves or in fees to European-owned dips.

But if Europeans enormously increased the cash demands upon Africans, they also provided the means by which these demands could be met other than by labour. And Africans in Southern Rhodesia very quickly realised that there were other more satisfactory means of entering the cash economy. Even more remarkable than the enormous increase in the African population between the rebellions and the First World War is the increase in African stockholding. Judged by Native Commissioner's reports, the rate of increase of African herds was some twelve to fifteen percent annually despite disease, slaughtering for food, and enormous sales. Soon the principal wealth of Africans in nearly every district in the country lay in cattle. And there were countless itinerant traders in addition to permanent stores willing and anxious to buy both cattle and surplus grain at fairly high prices, although

⁴¹ C.O. 417/208, B.S.A. Co., to C.O., 22.ii.1900; C.O. 417/310, B.S.A. Co. to C.O., 12.vii.1900; C.O. 417/320, C.O. to B.S.A. Co., 3.x.1901. The Colonial Office recognised the problem of semantics: 'How are we to discriminate between nice degrees of moral suasion', C.O. 417/320, minute, 26.vii.1901. The Colonial Office vetoed Taylor's appointment to the Under-Secretaryship for Native Affairs partly because of the memory of these indabas. Sir Richard Martin wrote on that occasion, 'I do not believe in Taylor as Chief Native Commissioner', C.O. 417/363, Martin to Graham, 6.viii.1902.

⁴² N3/22/1/1, Chief Native Commissioner, Correspondence, Native Labour General, 9.xii.1909 - 6.xii.1915, Cripps to Resident Commissioner, 11 and 15.i.1912; N3/22/1/2, 16.ii.1916 - 20.viii.1923, Cripps to Posselt, 2.viii.1919.

⁴³ Father Richartz of the Chishawasha Mission wrote in January 1901 that whenever the boys left school, 'the pernicious custom of lobola' lured them off to town to earn more wages than they could possibly earn at the mission; and there they relapsed into paganism, *The Zambesi Mission Record*, 1898-1901, 1 (xi).

⁴⁴ Milner was prepared to support the £2 tax, C.O. 417/317, Milner to Chamberlain, 12.i.1903. Sir Marshall Clarke however refused to do so, since he regarded the labour shortage as spurious, C.O. 417/373, Lawley to Chamberlain, 10.viii.1903, enclosing the Resident Commissioner's objections. During this controversy, both the Administrator and the High Commissioner set out to by-pass Clarke by corresponding directly. Milner subsequently suggested that the post of Resident Commissioner should be dispensed with, C.O. 417/392, tel. Milner to Lyttelton, 12.viii.1904.

prices did tend to fluctuate wildly. The cash requirements of entire districts, often working out at one pound per head of the population could be met in this way. The response was a highly rational one, for this was much more productive than wage labour at the low wages then obtaining, particularly during the First World War. Equally rational was the way in which Africans responded to the increased demand for maize and for such commodities as monkey nuts and beans introduced by the administration's dietary regulations for the mines. What seems extraordinary today is that the majority of Native Commissioners failed to see this as worthy productive enterprise. These sales reduced the labour supply and were therefore to be deplored.⁴⁵

Native Commissioners described with annoyance how labour gangs would congregate in villages only to have the wind taken from their sails by the arrival of a trader anxious to buy their cattle. Throughout the First World War, through a series of disastrous harvests, it is remarkable how Africans were able to continue meeting both their own food requirements and the cash demands of the administration from the sale of stock, even at a time when prices were declining and prices of African purchases like ploughs, hoes and clothing had increased by as much as 100 per cent. Despite the bad harvests, in many districts the able bodied men refused to go out to work, for the reduced demand for labour had led to a decline in wages. Moreover, there was no guarantee that after a long walk to the place of work, they would find jobs, for the Labour Bureau had surpluses in its depots every year from 1912 to 1915. As a result wages for bureau labourers had gone down in 1914.⁴⁶ It was clear at least to most Native Commissioners that low wages were a much greater disincentive than employers were willing to admit. One attacked the mines for 'screwing the native down to the lowest possible wage'.⁴⁷

After the First World War a series of good harvests caused the price of grain to slump. This coincided with a slump in the price of cattle, partly as a result of growing competition from expanding European farming. Some Native Commissioners hailed this with delight. The slump would have the salutary effect on the Africans of forcing them out to work.⁴⁸ It also had the effect of holding wages down at their war-time low.

There is of course an enormous variation in response of individual peoples

⁴⁵ Some Native Commissioners did not take this view of African enterprise, but it became virtually the official view, Hist. Mss. Collect., CH8 2/1, F.P.D. Chaplin Papers, Correspondence and Other Papers, General, 9.ii.1896 - 18.x.1933, Inskipp to Chaplin, 17.xii.1919. Lord Selborne had scorned the idea in 1906 when representatives of mining and farming had told him at an interview that Africans should not be allowed to use alternative routes into the cash economy because of the need for their unskilled labour, Hist. Mss. Collect., EY1 1/1, F. Eyles Papers, Correspondence and Other Papers, Political: 16.v.1904 - 23.iv.1921.

⁴⁶ N3/22/11/1, Chief Native Commissioner, Correspondence, Native Labour, Rhodesia Native Labour Bureau, 9.xii.1909 - 21.ii.1916, Upton to Secretary Rhodesia Chamber of Mines, 14.vi.1915. A reduction in the wages for bureau labourers had taken place in 1914.

⁴⁷ N9/1/10, report by E. G. Howman, N.C. Ndanga, 1907.

⁴⁸ N9/1/24, reports by N.C.'s for Charter, Ndanga, Victoria and Matobo, 1921. N. C. Matobo wrote that the 'difficulty in selling cattle and grain [was] an educative visitation.'

and parts of individual districts, depending on a whole range of factors, including the nature of the soil, of the terrain, and therefore of the economy, the size of villages, the proximity to employment or marketing areas, and whether a migration tradition was established. This forms a large complete study of its own. There is only space to mention one interesting specific contrast in this response to the cash economy between two neighbouring peoples in the Zambezi Valley. The Tonga had little or no stock, and cultivated only native cereals. The alternative routes into the cash economy were therefore closed to them, and in consequence they had to migrate in large numbers, and in fact they provided a considerable proportion of the labour force of the Wankie Colliery. The neighbouring Bashankwe, on the other hand, in a similar position as regards stock and crops, discovered tobacco; they quickly grew it in large quantities and sold up to 70 000 lbs. a year to traders. As a result very few went out to work.⁴⁹

The administration thought in terms of stimulants. They thought in other words in terms of the push. They gave little thought to the pull of paid labour. Indeed there was plenty to repel. Wages declined throughout the Chartered period, and contributed to the very considerable emigration of Africans from Southern Rhodesia to the Transvaal where they could earn considerably more and enjoy rather laxer liquor laws. So wages repelled. So too did the nature of mining work and the ticket system of payment, whereby a labourer had to fulfil a certain task in order to achieve his ticket for the day, and he had to complete thirty tickets to be paid. In other words it could take a labourer five to six weeks to secure what was supposed to be a monthly wage. Farm work was unpopular because of its low pay, its similarity to the Africans' employment in his own economy, and the absence of the life of the town or mine compound. Herding was particularly unpopular because so many African boys had been brought up to this since their earliest years. Also the brutalities of the European farmers, miners and compound managers repelled, and are amply testified to by the numerous cases of manslaughter, assault and defaulting of payment of wages that passed through the courts. The last particularly discredited paid employment. Africans very soon had a highly detailed intelligence system as to good and bad employers. Native Commissioners testified again and again that good employers had no trouble finding labour while the cries about the labour shortage invariably came from those very mines and other employers known to have a bad record. It is unfortunate that the various labour bureaux, set up to avoid recruitment by Native Commissioners, found themselves supplying labour to those bad employers who were perennially short. As a result the bureaux became very unpopular and most Africans preferred to migrate independently despite the blankets, food and jerseys issued by the bureau — or perhaps because of them, for these things seen by some commentators as important fringe benefits, had in fact to be paid for out of the

⁴⁹ N9/1/22-6, reports by N. C. Sebungwe, 1919-23.

labourer's wages during the early months of employment. The consequent loss of wages, coupled with the deferred pay the bureaux were obliged to levy for the health of the economies of the northern territories, could come as a shock to the labourer who had inadequately understood his agreement.

There were moreover frequent disasters on the mines, and there were frequent epidemics. The occurrence of either at a mine could cause its labour supply to slump for some time. It is only necessary to look at the enormous death rates from accident, pulmonary diseases and scurvy, at their worst over 50 per thousand per annum, and quite usually around 25 per thousand per annum to appreciate the repulsion from labour.

And yet there were some pulls. Africans acquired a taste for travel — as is witnessed by the large numbers travelling to the Transvaal and even as far away as Natal and the Cape⁵⁰ — for the life of the towns and for the conviviality of the mining compound with its weekend beer drinks. The mine store had its delights too. It was, it is true, a means for the mine to win back from the African his hard-earned wages, but it also provided the means to acquire clothing and other wants which could provide him with an entirely new status on his return to his home village.

In addition to this kind of want, the cash acquired through labour or sales was used also to benefit indigenous agriculture. Parallel with the enormous growth of stock-holding mentioned above went an amazing growth in the numbers of ploughs owned, hundreds being acquired every year. By the First World War there were several thousand ploughs in some districts of Matabeleland where there had been none fifteen years earlier. These ploughs had the effect of saving labour, but they also had the effect of keeping more men on the land, for ploughing involving as it did oxen, was a man's job, where hoeing had been primarily a woman's. In some areas they had the effect of increasing the acreage and therefore the disposable surplus in a good season.

Running throughout this period there was another important movement, a movement on the land. As we have seen, reserves had been created in almost every district at the behest of the Colonial Office. On private land Africans were subjected to exactions of rent, grazing fees and dipping charges, and in addition to all this experienced great insecurity of tenure. As a result more and more villages moved from alienated land on to the reserves. This was particularly true once African stockholding grew enormously and became a nuisance to European landowners. Notices to quit, permissible under the Private Locations Ordinance, increased in number every year. This was of course accelerated by the increasing alienation of unalienated land. There was also a movement off unalienated land because the Company levied rent there. In the reserves at least only tax was demanded. In the period from early in the century to 1923 this movement becomes

⁵⁰ See N3/22/4, Chief Native Commissioner, Correspondence, Native Labour, Employment of Southern Rhodesian Natives in the Union of South Africa, 20.v.1914 – 31.viii. 1923.

increasingly obvious. In peak years, the Native Commissioners reported many thousands on the move in some districts, and the proportion of population on the reserves grew considerably.⁵¹ In pressing this forward, European employers were cutting their own throats, for it is clear from Native Commissioners' statistics that both alienated and unalienated land usually provided a much better labour supply than did the reserves. The following table gives the percentages of able-bodied men who worked in the cash economy in 1912 from different types of land in a few districts for which figures are available.

			<i>Reserves</i>	<i>Unalienated</i>	<i>Alienated</i>
Mazoe	..	..	48	69	97
Chilimanzi	..	..	23	—	51
Umtali	..	..	33	34	63
Melsetter	..	..	72	79	71
Insiza	..	..	42	60	52
Mzingwane	..	..	39	56	71
Selukwe	..	..	68	67	70
Bubi	..	..	72	62	72

With the exception only of Melsetter and Bubi, the percentage from reserves is lower than elsewhere. Some Native Commissioners recognised this and deplored the whole process. The Native Commissioner, Bulawayo, for example, confronted with a declining African population in his district as Africans moved out to reserves in adjacent districts, wrote of the adverse effect this was having on the Bulawayo labour supply — the proportion of 'foreign' employees there increased every year.⁵²

In 1841 Herman Merivale had written in his *Lectures on Colonization and Colonies* this of reserves:

[The colonists] will complain, and with perfect truth, of the economical disadvantages which attend the interposition of uncultivated or half-cultivated tracts between populous districts; of their own suffering by the proximity of the natives, and of the political mischiefs produced by these little inert republics, stagnant in the very centre of society. And government will find itself, as it has always done, unable to resist these importunities, and cajoled by the thousand implausibilities advanced in favour of removing these unfortunates a further stage into the wilderness, it will comply with the exigencies of the times, and the natives will be transported to some other region, to be followed there again with sure and rapid steps by the encroaching tide of European population.⁵³

Merivale, it will be remembered, opposed reserves, and favoured what he called 'amalgamation'. In this remarkably prophetic passage, he predicted what was to happen in Rhodesia sixty years and more later, if his pressing forward of the African population is taken to mean in this case the pressure from alienated land to unalienated land, and so on to the reserves. There

⁵¹ For some figures, see Palmer, p.39, n.21.

⁵² N9/1/17, report by N.C., Bulawayo, 1914.

⁵³ Merivale, II, p.176.

is a more striking parallel in the Coryndon Reserves Commission,⁵⁴ when certain small reserves that were too close to European settlement reverted to the Company, and some compensation was given by the increase of the larger reserves further away, a net total of over one million acres reverting to the Company.

What effect did this have on the relationship between the indigenous and the cash economy? By this movement, the African response to the cash economy which as we have seen was considerable and highly rational was stifled by constant pressure further from the centres of employment, further from marketing opportunity, further from the lines of communication. The labour supply did not in fact suffer in the long run, mainly because of the overcrowding and overgrazing of many of the reserves, and because the alternative and highly legitimate routes into the cash economy were cut off by growing European competition and the consequent slump in grain and cattle prices. This pattern was already in evidence before the end of the Chartered period.

The labour problem in Rhodesia in the Chartered period was not a product of inadequate African population nor was it the product of the alleged congenital African laziness. The Native Affairs Commission of 1905 had asserted that up to 50 per cent of the able bodied males could be extracted from the indigenous economy without occasioning the breakdown of that economy. Native Commissioners, admittedly using only the most crude methods, very often no more than day to day observation, invariably asserted that a figure far higher than 50 per cent were going to work. But it must be remembered that these men were only going out to work for a few months of each year. They were not in fact lost to the indigenous economy during its critical months. So the labour problem was principally a product of the migrant labour system that produced a time of plenty for labour during the dry season, and a dearth as soon as the rains and the first planting season commenced. At the really critical period at the turn of the century, when mines were allegedly closing down for want of labour, the labour problem was a product of the general depression and of the ease with which the ten shilling hut tax could be acquired by other means. There is plenty of evidence both from the observations of the London Office of the Company and of the Resident Commissioner in Rhodesia that mines were closing down for other reasons, but used labour as a scapegoat.⁵⁵ This was the case with the Bonsor and Dunraven mines which closed in 1898; the Bonsor moreover had had an explosion with serious loss of life.⁵⁶

The labour problem was essentially of European making. Europeans by and large for social, political and wrong-headed economic reasons desired a

⁵⁴ *Papers relating to the Southern Rhodesia Native Reserves Commission, 1915* [Cd.8674]. H.C. 1917-18, xxiii, 135.

⁵⁵ C.O. 417/392, Clarke to Milner, 3.v.1904, encl. in Milner to Lyttelton, 6.vi.1904.

⁵⁶ H. Hensman, *A History of Rhodesia*, London, Blackwood, 1900, p.285. See also Hist. Mss. Collect., DR 2, W. I. S. Driver Papers.

migrant labour system. And migrant labour was inefficient and not conducive to a good labour supply. Europeans saw to it that wages and conditions were poor, however much the administration tried to improve housing and dietary regulations and the mode of inspection, certainly poorer than the Transvaal, and failed to recognise this as a serious disincentive. Wages were a prey to crude market forces. So, when Africans were forced out to work by a bad harvest or a slump in prices, they invariably failed to find work, or found that wages were dropping, and there was a consequent deleterious effect on the labour supply in the following season. Europeans too provided the alternative routes into the cash economy, routes which were seized upon by Africans as infinitely preferable, and better adjusted to the improvement of their own economy. And above all Europeans again through a desire for social and economic segregation, pressed Africans further from centres of employment, further from opportunities for rational response to the cash economy. But while this land policy reduced the labour supply in the short term, in the long term it forced more Africans out to work, by causing overcrowding and overstocking, and by reducing the possibility of alternative entry to the cash economy. By the end of the Charter period the labour problem seems a thing of the past and ceases to figure so predominantly in the official sources.

In 1893, Sydney Olivier, then a junior clerk in the Colonial Office, had written of the tax proposals:

The further concession they desire is a concession of forced labour. They employ the Pecksniffian argument with which we are so familiar in South Africa, that it is the holy mission of the white man to teach the native habits of settled industry; the industry, *bien entendu*, being always contemplated under the form of wage labour for the white man in the mines or on the land which he cannot work for himself.⁵⁷

They wish to kill two birds with one stone, he went on, expropriate the land, and starve the natives into working for the white expropriator on their own former property. Olivier's view was of course regarded as extreme by his superiors, particularly that trusty friend of the Company, Edward Fairfield, but by 1923 his view was not very far from the truth. The only approved entry into the cash economy was indeed paid labour for the white man, and this labour was very often, particularly in Matabeleland, conducted on land which the Africans had themselves formerly inhabited.

⁵⁷ C.O. 417/110, minute by Olivier on B.S.A. Co. to C.O., 7.vii.1893.



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